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Professionals in Practice

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Ethical cleansing? A case study of deliberate deception as a justifiable research approach within a NHS Trust.

Abstract

This paper describes a small scale research exercise conducted in a north west of England hospital trust involving 15 cleaners studying for a Cleaning and Support Services NVQ level 2 qualification delivered within the workplace by the local further education college. The course required within the awarding body's unit structure the compilation of evidence via portfolio building which included recording observations, oral and/or written questioning, witness statements, candidate statements and importantly for this study activities recorded on worksheets as part of professional discussions within taught classes. The tutor alerted the researcher to the outcomes of diagnostic literacy assessments which recorded low developmental literacy levels within the group ranging from Entry level 1 to Entry level 3 as measured by the national *Skills for Life* scheme. It was agreed between the tutor and the researcher that the materials collated for the cleaning award portfolio could be also used as evidence to gain a literacy qualification and the cleaners without their knowledge or consent were subsequently registered for a literacy qualification as well as the cleaning one. Their line manager was however informed of the deception and she agreed to collude in the exercise. The deception was justified on the grounds that the cleaners represented a social group categorised by the government as 'hard to reach', a group who had disengaged from formal education at an early age and had accrued minimal qualifications and to be ethically justified in that the NVQ 2 qualification was mandatory for their future employment so why not give them certificated credit for enhancing their literacy skills? To deceive in this manner also removed any potential barriers for the cleaners engaging with formal learning again including the possible stigmatisation of being labelled as adults with significant literacy development needs. All of the 15 cleaners gained the cleaning award and at differing levels a literacy award. At the small award ceremony, the cleaners were informed of the deception though the rationale was not disclosed and the dual accreditation was explained as simply good practice and their achievement something to be very proud of. In a semi-formal feedback session, 12 expressed delight at gaining a literacy qualification 6 of whom intended to continue for higher awards now that they knew 'they could do it', 2 were less sure and one was outraged that we had labelled her as someone in need of literacy help and felt patronised.

Key words: deception, literacy, ethics, barriers to learning

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Introduction.

15 cleaners in a north west of England hospital trust were studying for a Cleaning and Support Services NVQ level 2 qualification, a mandatory award required to be completed as evidence of meeting prescribed standards of operational cleanliness. The researcher agreed with the tutor delivering the course and with the consent of the cleaners' line manager to use the NVQ learning materials as evidence for a *Skills for Life* literacy award, the cleaners having previously been assessed as having literacy competencies from Entry level 1 to Entry level 3. The ethical conundrum this paper explores was that the cleaners were not informed they were studying for the literacy qualification, in research terms an approach which could certainly be described as concealment or even construed as deception.

Deception in educational research is perhaps an unfortunate term with its connotations of underhand approaches and sly deviancy. Cohen et al (2007) frame the dilemma in terms of the extent the deception's costs/benefits ratio is a measure of contribution to the advancement of the human condition. Clarke (1999) suggests the institution conducting the research should be able to determine beforehand the sorts of people who will not suffer from participating though such subjectivity raises questions of confidently quantifying prior to beginning a research exercise what will not cause harm (Hammersley and Traianou, 2007). 'Concealment' has perhaps a softer edge to it though such an approach still raises complex issues of moral justification (Tellings, 2006). For Lugosis (2006), concealment has to be a consideration if measurement of certain situations is to be both valid and reliable. Perhaps discussing the paradigms of deception and concealment is nothing more than a semantic exercise in that it could be justifiably argued that to conceal is to deceive, information has been withheld. Whatever terminology is preferred, the cleaners did not know they were studying for a literacy qualification until the NVQ cleaning course had been completed.

Context

Successive governments' intent to increase levels of adult literacy was finally formally introduced as a national campaign in the 1970s (Hillier and Hamilton, 2004) culminating in the present *Skills for Life* strategy which began in 1998 and has at its core the remit to boost the country's economy by increasing employment skills which would also enhance social cohesion and thus provide an increased quality of life (Department for Education and Skills {DfES}, 2001, 2003). *The Moser Report* (DfEE, 1999) suggested that 7 million adults in England, which equates to 1 in 5 adults, could not locate within the alphabetical index of the Yellow Pages a page reference for plumbers. The House of Commons Public accounts Committee (2009) reports that £5 billion was spent on basic skills courses between 2001 and 2007 rising to an estimated £9 billion by 2011. The challenge to improve literacy competency however remains, Shepherd (2009:4) reporting on the annual SATs results notes that 20% of 11 year olds failed to reach the English standard which equates to '40% of boys being unable to write a complete sentence using commas though three quarters of girls managed to.'

The initial and diagnostic assessment of literacy competence of the cleaning students of this study indicate they fall into the categories above. They also reflect the lower achievement categories of the Skills for Life Survey (DfES, 2003) as tabulated below:

Literacy results

Level	% of 16-65 yr olds	Number of 16-65 yr
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		olds
Entry level 1 or below	3%	1.1 m
Entry level 2	2%	0.6 m
Entry level 3	11%	3.5 m
(All Entry level 3 or below)	(16%)	(5.2 m)

For the cleaner cohort measured at Entry 1 to 3, the levels equate to:

Level	Literacy (reading) An adult classified at this level...	Equivalent to...
Entry level 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understands short texts with repeated language patterns on familiar topics - Can obtain information from commons signs and symbols 	National curriculum level 1
Entry level 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understands short straightforward texts on familiar topics - Can obtain information from short documents, familiar sources and signs and symbols 	Level expected of a seven-year-old (national curriculum level 2)
Entry level 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understands short straightforward texts on familiar topics accurately and independently - Can obtain information from everyday sources 	Level expected of an 11-year-old (national curriculum levels 3-4)

Justification of the project

It could be argued that almost any intervention that improves literacy attainment is justified given that this cohort is performing at an attainment level expected of primary school children. Intervention strategies however are complex and their success rates variable. Leitch (2006:3) estimates only 250,000 of the 7 million estimated by Moser are taking part in relevant study and 'few employers take a constructive approach to advancing basic skills in their workforce.' This study bypasses employer reticence. Grinyer (2006) following up on the Skills for Life survey notes that the group least likely to attend literacy classes are those who hold few or even no qualifications; this study also skirts round this issue. Bird and Akerman (2005) bemoan gaps in provision and funding difficulties, issues not a concern for this study, the funding had been ring fenced for the mandatory NVQ award, the literacy element a free bonus. Social factors such as 'a poor school experience, a fear of humiliation because of their needs, a fear that they are the only ones with the problem and a lack of self confidence' (Learndieck, 2001: 2) which inhibit participation in literacy classes is also not an issue as the cleaners didn't have the slightest inkling they were being targeted. It was impossible for them therefore to have any feeling of being stigmatised. The classes were at a convenient time

(their working day) so access was not an issue and in their workplace which was deemed in a survey by Atkin et al (2005) to be important to many learners. The House of Commons Public accounts Committee (2009) notes that 70% success rates in skills for Life provision as good, this project achieved a 100% success rate. The project also offers value for money, The National Audit Office (2008) reports the cost of teaching an Entry level course as £960, for the cleaner project there were no additional literacy teaching costs on top of the NVQ, just the cost of registration to the accrediting boards.

Conclusion.

All of the 15 cleaners gained the cleaning award and at differing levels a literacy award. At the small award ceremony, the cleaners were informed of the deception though the rationale was not disclosed to avoid any possible feelings of stigmatisation and the dual accreditation was explained as simply good practice (more deception?) and their achievement something to be very proud of. In a semi-formal feedback session, 12 expressed delight at gaining a literacy qualification 6 of whom intended to continue for higher awards now that they knew 'they could do it', 2 were less sure and one was outraged that we had labelled her as someone in need of literacy help and felt patronised.

The deliberate act deception or concealment employed in the project could be argued reflects the Unitarian principle of the greatest good for the most people. Only one person was possibly 'harmed' and 12 delighted, all gaining an important qualification. But of course there was no way of knowing this at the start of the project, with another cohort that delight might have been resentment. Do the ends therefore justify the means?

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